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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABIDJAN 000895

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF PLUMB, INR/AA GRAVES  
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TAGS: PREF EAID PREL PHUM IV

SUBJECT: ASSESSING THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF THE ONGOING VOLATILITY IN COTE D'IVOIRE'S WESTERN REGION

REF: A. ABIDJAN 880

1B. ABIDJAN 860

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary. World Food Program, United Nations Operations in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and private business leaders in the "Greater West" region, which straddles the "Green Line" and encompasses the extreme western portion of the former "Zone of Confidence," concur that the situation remains volatile, despite a recent lull. The longstanding conflict pits native ethnic Gueres allied with the President's faction against "foreigners" in the region allied with the Forces Nouvelles. The international community is equally pessimistic about the situation. Despite efforts by the international community and international aid agencies to encourage Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from both groups to return to their homes, intense competition over increasingly scarce land resources provides the fuel for continued tensions. Militias allied with the President's faction remain armed and dangerous, while armed Forces Nouvelles partisans continue to protect their compatriots. Without substantial improvement in the Greater West's security climate, the process to return IDPs home and some comprehensive settlement of the land question, progress on nationwide DDR, audiences foraines and elections preparations will be marred. End Summary.

12. (C) An Embassy team consisting of Charge Huddleston and Econoff Massinga visited the Center, Center-North, Northwest and Western parts of Cote d'Ivoire from August 11th through the 16th, starting with Northern and Northwestern regional political/economic hubs Bouake, Korhogo and Odienné (reftel A). The team later visited the key "Greater West" region of Man, Duekoué and Guiglo which straddles the former "Zone of Confidence" (and now the "Green Line," an uneasy boundary separating North and South), and engaged well-placed sources with UNOCI, international aid organizations and private businesses, who collectively provided a useful examination of the political state of play in the region.

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The Saga of Allogenes, Autochtones in the "Greater West"  
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13. (C) After a brief stop to visit a Self-Help project in Man (a relatively prosperous "land port" town within the

Forces Nouvelles-controlled zone, just north of the former Zone of Confidence), the Embassy team received a briefing from World Food Program (WFP) officials headquartered in Guiglo (see refel B for OCHA officer meeting with same interlocutor). The WFP Director Wilfred Kombe, who is well-acquainted with all political groups in the area, presented a sobering picture of the state of affairs regarding simmering ethnic tensions, land tenure, and the troubling persistence of armed militias. Addressing the "Greater West" region (encompassing the rough circle from Douekue to Guiglo, Blollekin, Toulepleu, up through the former Zone of Confidence to FN-held Danane and Man), Kombe related the contemporary history of the region, beginning with the brief occupation of the area by the FN in 2002 and the subsequent flight of government authorities and employees. This led, in turn to a mass exodus of ethnic Gueres (known universally as autochtones, denoting their indigenous status), native to the region and largely aligned with the central government and FPI, to the major (and FANCI-controlled) towns of Guiglo and Duekoue as well into the forested region immediately to the south. As the government/FANCI counterattacked, the long-term Burkinabe, Malian and Guinean immigrants to the region (known universally as "allogenes") who resided along the Guiglo-Toulepleu axis either pushed north into the forest area south of the Zou road, seizing land and setting up plantations, or fled to IDP camps outside of Guiglo and Duekoue run by international aid agencies.

¶4. (C) Kombe related how allogenies have long-standing ties to the region and the land. Often several generations back, these "foreigners" (and often considered interchangeably foreign with "autochtones", i.e., ethnic "outsiders" who happen to come from elsewhere in Cote d'Ivoire) came and purchased informal, unwritten land rights from Guere

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autochtones. Over time, these allogenies communities grew with added immigration and natural increase, a process fueled by successful cocoa and coffee farming. Autochtonal Gueres, widely considered (by themselves as well) to be undisciplined farmers, continued to allow the proliferation of these outsider camps, until they have become, in the Kombe's rough estimation, approximately 2/3 of the region's overall population.

¶5. (C) According to Kombe, in the wake of the FANCI counterattack, autochtones Guere youth formed "self-defense" brigades, i.e., militias. These militias have clashed repeatedly since 2002 with allogenies in the forested region south of Zou within the southern portion of the Zone of Confidence, with respite from violence only seen in the past several months. FN fighters, aided by Dozo (traditional hunters feared by autochtones as powerful medicine men) have lent their armed assistance to allogenies in the region south of Zou, further enflaming the conflict and facilitating the flow of cocoa and coffee north through FN-territories. Fighting has deterred many IDPs (both allogenies and autochtones) from returning to their land. Food insecurity has ensued, prompting WFP and other international agency intervention.

¶6. (C) Since the March 4 Ouagadougou Peace Accord (OPA), Kombe reported that Ivorian authorities have tried to encourage IDPs to return to their original homes. The "Mixed Brigades" (so far only comprised of units from the government's Armed Forces, FANCI, and which report directly to the dysfunctional, FANCI-controlled Joint Integrated Command Center) have brought a measure of calm to the region.

"Go and See" visits (see refel B) organized by international relief agencies have drawn the attention of IDPs anxious to return home. WFP estimates that in Guiglo and Duekoue IDP camps, some 3000 IDPs remain out of perhaps 7000 before the OPA.

¶7. (C) With the OPA, Kombe said the uniformed military

officer prefect of Guiglo has tried to settle this jigsaw puzzled conflict by encouraging IDP allogenies to go back to their homes in either the Zou region or in the Bololekin area (reftel B), which would, in theory, allow autochtones Guere IDPs to go back to their homes along the Guiglo-Toulepleu axis. What is complicating this, however, is the fact that new allogenies, many allegedly very recently arrived from Burkina and Mali, have come and set up farms in the region south of Zou, enabled by the absence of controls in the FN-North and probably abetted by compatriots controlling and fighting for the land. Government restrictions on farming in "foret classe" (the rough equivalent of the U.S. National Forest system) have only exacerbated the problem.

¶8. (C) Kombe said flatly that "if elections take place in this current level of insecurity, war will erupt." He said FPI/FANCI-backed militias remain strong with up to 10,000 under arms, and are particularly concentrated in Bangolo. Overall, Kombe said that the "for show" disarmament of May 19 in Guiglo has been wholly ineffective in reigning in the menace of the militias.

¶9. (C) The Embassy team received a briefing from UNOCI's Security officials in Duekeue. UNOCI said that "the situation is the most dangerous since the war began," despite the lull seen in the past several months. Militia clashes with allogenies had become a near daily occurrence, with frequent casualties. Autochthonous Guere militias have grown and become increasingly powerful. The "Mixed Brigades" have brought a measure of peace to the region as of late, often using brutal tactics that have brought to heel many of the bandits and highwaymen who had plagued the area (Licorne and UNOCI sweeps of the former Zone of Confidence have been ineffective, and both have essentially stopped conducting patrols since the OPA). UNOCI believes, however, that further expansion of law and order depends on the Mixed Brigades receiving their Forces Nouvelles complements, the deployment of the civil authority (particularly the sub-prefects) and real militia dismantlement. UNOCI echoed the WFP estimate that the pro-FPI militia really do have 10000 men under arms; while their leaders may be laying low after their May 19 debacle (where leaders such as "Colombo" of the APWE militia were accused by the rank and file of

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pocketing the disarmament money that President Gbagbo distributed the day of the ceremony), the groups themselves maintain a real capacity to cause mayhem, even if the President is trying, tentatively, to back away from overtly supporting them. Indeed, a prominent militia leader, Force Lima chieftain "Ahmed," openly expressed bitterness towards the President, the FPI and the FANCI on August 22, accusing the groups' backers of luring them to serve as "cannon fodder" in the Western conflict only to be left out to dry. Ahmed noted his men are still armed and capable of "addressing their concerns." To further complicate matters, UNOCI's regional security team fully expects trouble in the coming months as the cocoa harvest is brought in and money circulates in the region.

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Audiences Foraines, Elections, and Human Rights in the  
Greater West  
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¶10. (C) UNOCI's Duekoue region elections, human rights and disarmament officers met with the Embassy team, and offered an equally somber assessment. The elections officer said bluntly that the audiences foraines (mobile courts that will issue birth certificates, ostensibly scheduled to begin Sept 8, according to a recent Prime Minister statement) "should not take place in the West" without substantial improvements in the security situation. Saying "the situation in Haiti is easier," the elections officer (a Haitian himself) said the profusion of weapons in the region would "undermine the credibility of elections" were they to be held in the current

security climate. The Integrated Command Center is supposedly charged with dismantlement of militias, but UNOCI has seen no movement in that direction. The HR officer presented a troubling tableau of a long-running conflict with grave violations on both sides, with the depredations of criminal gangs compounding the problem. The HR officer views the ethnic conflict as easily reignited and that the protracted fighting has left all parties with a deep mistrust of others.

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Regional Business and the International Community's View of  
the Situation  
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¶11. (C) During an August 21 donors roundtable (septel), the international community's view on the situation in the West was clearly not sanguine. The EU has pulled all funding for disarmament of militias, discouraged by the lack of progress and the waste of scarce DDR resources. None of the roundtable participants see evidence of a willingness by the leaders of the coalition government to confront their armed allies in the region.

¶12. (C) Representatives of French forest products company Thanry, active in the Greater West region, echoed much of the commentary by WFP and UNOCI officials. They see the ongoing ethnic struggle over land as the central factor fueling the conflict. Moreover, the struggle and the continued inflow of allogenies have put severe strain on available forest resources (septel) as groups push further into remote regions to establish farms.

Comment. (C) While the rest of the country is moving, in fits and starts, towards a greater degree of normalcy, the restart of the audiences process and elections preparations, the residents of the "Greater West" remain mired in a very different, and more uncertain, reality than most Ivorians. Significant progress in the "Greater West" region is critical for the effective nationwide roll-out of the normalization process (reftel A); however, the significant progress needed in this regard will be sorely tested by overlapping and yet-unresolved land tenure, ethnicity and profusion-of-arms problems. Perhaps with intense focus on the problem by both the Forces Nouvelles and the government, in a spirit of cooperation, the country's leaders could sufficiently address these questions during the current run-up to the Presidential elections. To date, such willingness to tackle this region's problems appears scant. Whether the Greater West's volatility will be a complete "showstopper" for the process

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of national reconciliation remains to be seen. For its part, the international community should exercise what leadership it can to encourage a successful settlement of this region's problems. End Comment.

HUDDLESTON